

Klamath people tell feds dams must go

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By John Driscoll, staff writer

The time is now to consider bringing down dams on the Klamath River and breath life back into its fishery, dozens of speakers told the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission on Tuesday. More than 200 people packed a large hotel conference room, all adamant that Portland, Ore.,-based PacifiCorp properly weigh its effects on the river. Most at the public hearing insisted the small amount of electricity produced by the facilities doesn't match the benefits restored salmon fisheries would have. "This is wrong, and this is a chance to right that wrong," said Yurok Tribal Chairman Howard McConnell. PacifiCorp, a division of ScottishPower, is seeking a 50-year license for Iron Gate, Copco I and Copco II, J.C. Boyle, Keno and Link River dams. All told, the dams generate 150 megawatts of electricity -- enough to supply 70,000 homes. McConnell pointed out that despite the dams, many on the Yurok Reservation are without power. He said PacifiCorp has failed to do the most basic studies on the dams' impacts to the river and its people. The license for the dams expires in 2006. FERC will determine the range of issues PacifiCorp must analyze. The agency said it hopes to have a draft environmental impact statement done in July 2005. The lowermost dam, Iron Gate, stops salmon from reaching historic spawning grounds in the upper river. Despite protest from American Indian tribes and fishermen, PacifiCorp has opted not to consider building fish ladders, opting only to look at trucking fish around the dams. The company has also resisted the idea of removing any of the dams, though lower river advocates, the National Research Council, and the California Energy Commission, among other groups, have encouraged such an evaluation. Nancy Stark, aid to California Assemblywoman Patty Berg, D-Eureka, read a statement asking FERC to demand an analysis of decommissioning all the dams. PacifiCorp has proposed plans to improve whitewater rafting, fishing and recreation at its facilities, and said it's open to exploring oxygenating water in the often fetid Iron Gate Reservoir. Yurok elder Richard Myers told the commission staff that the fish in the Klamath can't afford another 50 years of dams. The past few years, which have seen major die-offs of both adult and juvenile fish, have been troubling, he said. "We need to pray and make these men change their minds," Myers said, urging PacifiCorp to remove its dams. A number of speakers talked about the devastating impacts the dams and other problems on the Klamath have had on North Coast communities. The commercial salmon fishery in Northern California and Southern Oregon is all but closed in an effort to protect the Klamath's ailing stocks. Eureka commercial fisher Marge Salo said FERC shouldn't need an 80-pound document to "do the right thing." Salo said coastal communities are dying, while her boat is tied up. "I resent it," she said. "I really do." By deadline, dozens more still had not addressed the commission staff.